

—Illustration by Gustave Doré from "The Divine Comedy."

Through Hell, Purgatory & Heaven

THE DIVINE COMEDY. By Dante Alighieri. Translated by Lawrence Grant White. With Illustrations by Gustave Doré. New York: Pantheon Books. 1948. 188 pp. \$10.

Reviewed by THOMAS CALDECOT CHUBB

THE translator of a great poem is like a navigator who sails his ship where there is both wind and tide. If he goes where the breezes are fair, he may well find that, as they help him along, he is struggling against a foul tide. If he steers where the tides favor him, he may be headed by the wind.

The translator is in the same boat. If he conveys literal meaning, he is apt to go far away from the concentrate of music and intense imagery that makes for poetry, and if he writes poetry he is likely to keep distant from meaning and sense.

With no one is the dilemma that this implies more apparent than with Dante, and nowhere more so than in that great structure of medieval feeling and thought which he called "Comedia," but which we more appropriately name "The Divine Comedy." For in no writing that I know of are the music and the meaning so inextricably mingled, so that if you impair one you infringe upon the other, in this case the whole being considerably less than the sum of its parts.

For that reason—the difficult and the elusive always being a goal—the great Dante poem has been the temptation and the despair of perhaps more translators than any other work.

A partial list—some have only rendered fragments—includes such diverse names as Byron, Leigh Hunt, Charles Norton Eliot, George Musgrave, Courtney Langdon, C. H. Grandgent, John Jay Chapman, H. F. Carey (his is the standard, if old-fashioned translation), Jefferson Butler Fletcher, Lawrence Binyon, Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, and Melville Best Anderson.

Each one has conveyed something of the great Florentine, and considerably more of himself. Which one you prefer will depend upon your own temperament. Not one is a substitute for Dante in the original. More than one may lead you to seek him there.

Now we have a new addition to the long list. Lawrence Grant White comes from a long line of Dante enthusiasts, his grandfather having reviewed Longfellow's translation when it first appeared. He has worked on his own translation for twenty-five years.

It is, in many ways, a worthy product of so long an effort. Mr. White is on the side of those who seek meaning rather than melody, insisting that "the luckless translator can never recapture the beauty of Dante's music" and stating that "in this version the aim has been to tell the story as simply and as accurately as possible."

This aim he has certainly achieved. His rendering of Dante's Vergil- and Beatrice-conducted journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven is pleasant, easy, readable, and reasonably accurate. It is written in the "form used by Milton in his 'Paradise Lost'" since "terza rima is alien to English,"

and if there are even more lines of prose (and uninspired prose at that) than in Milton himself, there is some excellent, and much adequate, poetry.

But even in this handsome book, it is not Dante. As a matter of fact, and through no fault of Mr. White's, it cannot ever be Dante in a language to which *terza rima*—and the thoughts and the vocabulary which produced Dante's *terza rima*—is alien. He who wants to enjoy a full, or even a substantial, measure of this mighty Italian poet is still, and will be always, just where he started. He must master the Tuscan tongue.

65 Years Young

THE CLOUDS: Aigeltinger, Russia, and Other Verse. By William Carlos Williams. Aurora, N. Y.: The Wells College Press; Cummington, Mass.: The Cummington Press. 1948. 64 pp. \$5.

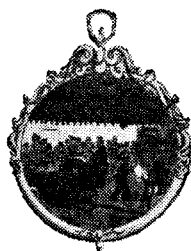
Reviewed by HUBERT CREEKMORE

AMONG contemporary poets, of both the youngest generation with its fledgling volumes and the oldest generation with its promises of maturity, William Carlos Williams remains the one whose lines are most spontaneous, fresh, and alive. Though his first book, like Ezra Pound's, was a pamphlet of Victorian influences, and though much of his life has been devoted to medical practice, he has continued through three decades of changing fashions to be the always modern voice of poetry.

In this latest collection of sixty-one poems, one finds the sparkle and clarity of his images undiminished. And—as if in answer to those critics who cannot fathom in his lyrics certain qualities they share with Chinese lyrics—a more explicit indication of their meaning. One finds longer, flowing lines, fewer staccato effects, but still the same directness; a deepening of emotional significance, recently so apparent in the first two volumes of his "Paterson"; and none of the academic bread-stuffing and dehydration that make unappetizing so much of our current poetic fare. "And, as usual," he writes, "the fight as to the nature of poetry—Shall the philosophers capture it?"

There is variety—satire, terse commentaries, lyrics of love and landscape, meditations, jokes—and through it all the pervasive feeling of elation in nature, including mankind; the sudden grasp toward sadly transient beauty, and endless curiosity about and absorption of life. In short, a youthful poet at sixty-five!

For Your

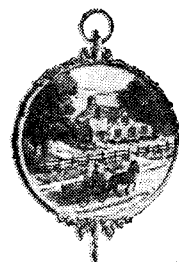


CORNELIA OTIS SKINNER
Family Circle

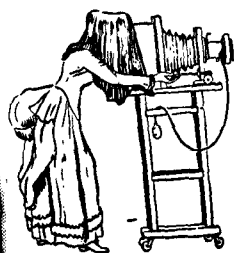
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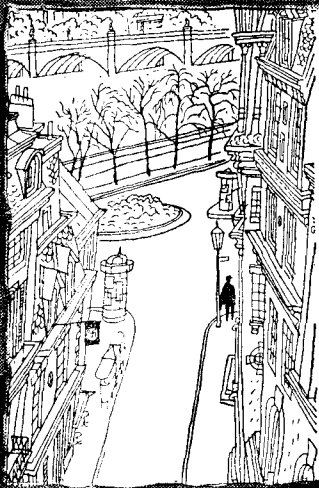
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Fall Reading



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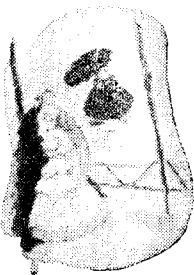
EMILY EDEN

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FICTION

(Continued from page 18)

strains of the war. Mr. Kane has adroitly packed a great deal of this history into a spare, rapid narrative.

The great fault of the book is its excessively romantic quality. The old South is romanticized; Washington under Pierce and Buchanan is romanticized; Richmond with McClellan and Grant thundering at the gate is romanticized. When the personages are not romanticized (as most of the Southern figures are), they are likely to be caricatured a little. General Winfield Scott, for example, is presented as a veritable grotesque; he had that side, to be sure, but it was only one side. What may be called the everyday aspect of life in the period is not rendered. Every transaction is presented on an emotional plane, and nearly every figure—most of all Varina—is in a state of constant tension. The years 1845-65 were a time of much drama and not a little melodrama, but there were many inter-

ludes of pedestrian calm even in Mrs. Jefferson Davis's existence. More realism about slavery, politics, Congress, and war, more homely touches appropriate to a mother and housewife, would have improved the book. And it must be said that some of the great men brought into the chronicle, such as John C. Calhoun, are but shadows of a name.

Yet the book has merits which leave a distinct impression upon the reader: a vivid apprehension of time and place, a real grasp of the complex politics of the era, and above all an understanding of the unusual woman who always holds the center of the piece. Mr. Kane has given careful study to these years, using many libraries and consulting many authorities. He is faithful to the facts of history, and some of his insights will please historical students. He has given especially hard study to Varina Howell Davis, and much as one may learn about her in her own book, and from Eron Howland's two-volume biography, this is the best depiction of her personality in print. She is well worth knowing.

They didn't call it anything. They merely fought on, numb with cold, groggy with sleeplessness, hungry and haggard. Through the snow the Germans kept coming as though driven by a final and furious hope.

This is a remarkably effective battle account, not of strategy and combat but of soldiers lost and wandering in the forest, of troops dived on by their own planes, of an old village woman trying to get into her roped-off house and crying that the sentry had stolen her sheets. The comradeship of battle does not appear, but its loneliness does. The men who died here, and the men who lived, were "the men you saw every day, talked to, called by their names, and did not know."

It is a surprisingly masculine novel. Even a woman war correspondent could not be expected to see war so completely as men see it. The narrative is focused on the men, and though it deals truly with both men and women the motives of the men are more clearly and firmly made known. The tone is masculine and the idiom, beyond and beneath the GI argot, is essentially man's idiom.

The very closeness of war threatens the story in its later chapters. The quickening advance through Germany, the candid account of looting, the occupying of Munich, the meeting with the Russians, and the final sickening visit to the prison camp at Dachau—these events dwarf the characters and for a little while overshadow their situations. It seems that the novel is turning into first-class reporting, but at the end it is Jake Levy's character we have before us and not the sweating, marching, looting men. Miss Gellhorn's novel brings the public war to bear on a private consciousness, on a man's hopes and wishes, on his humanity. Her novel, with its unfaltering outward reality, moves significantly inward into human character and realization.

Public War and Private Consciousness

THE WINE OF ASTONISHMENT.

By Martha Gellhorn. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948. 325 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by WALTER HAVIGHURST

THE last winter of war in the European Theatre smolders and sputters and explodes in the pages of Miss Gellhorn's novel. It begins with the boredom and weariness of American troops in a forest campaign near the Luxembourg border. In the midst of their misery the men have one solace—the private daydream, the secret sanctuary of memory and wish. Each has his own grateful picture of a future far from the ruin and wretchedness of war. For Lieutenant-Colonel John Smithers it was a never-ending day of perfect duck shooting on a river in Georgia. For Private Jacob Levy it was a valley he had once glimpsed in the Smoky Mountains, where the days would pass in stillness and beauty. There a man could just be alone, just living there by the river.

The theme of Miss Gellhorn's uncompromising novel is that the wish must be discarded. Jake Levy discovers that even in peace the world won't leave him alone. There is a line in Wordsworth, that Private Levy didn't know, and Miss Gellhorn doesn't mention, that tells what happened in this novel: "I made no vows, but vows

were then made for me." So the sanctuary of wish dissolved like a morning mist on the river and at the end Jake Levy, with the incredible peace outside his hospital window, found himself committed to a lasting struggle. Not that this novel is Wordsworthian. But it moves steadily inward, without any diminishing of outward narrative, and it culminates in a moral discovery and assertion.

The story finds the 277th Infantry, Twentieth Division, stalemated in the rainy forest, thinking that the war has gone to hell. When they are sent to rest billets at Luxembourg City they stare at the clean streets and the lighted buildings. A city could be beautiful simply because it was standing. Then it became beautiful for a better reason. There was a Red Cross girl at the Officers' Club, and a blue-eyed waitress in a cafe. Soon the colonel forgot his river in Georgia and Jake Levy began enlarging his dream shack in the Smokies, getting it ready for two.

In sound and flexible prose that responds to the narrative, Miss Gellhorn follows her men back to a thinly-held front, where the December snow kept erasing the litter and violence of war. Then suddenly in the iron cold the Germans attacked—through the snow, the forest, across the river, over the fields. The men didn't call it the Battle of the Bulge.

